

## DICKENS AND SOCIAL REFORM

FROM some of the writings of Matthew Arnold and from the minor novelists and minor poets of the latter part of the nineteenth century we of the end-of-the-century generation deduced the conclusion that things are important in inverse ratio to their size. The smaller a thing, the more important. That novel was great in which least happened; that novel was greatest in which nothing happened. It came to be impolite for anything to occur in a novel. Those were evil days for Dickens.

We were reading big men even in those days, but the important thing about them was not their bigness. We read Wordsworth for his revelation of the minor pains of minor people; we read Browning for his skill in shading a spiritual motive to the vanishing-point; we read Tennyson because he helped us to endure life with a minimum of faith; the finest thing in Shakespeare was his observation that a willow leaf is white on the under side.

Of course the really important thing about Shakespeare was his power to understand a whole world of people and to recreate them in valiant poetry for a practical stage; the really important thing about Browning was that he had enough fire in his soul to burn up the sins of the world; the really important thing about Tennyson was that he fought down enervating melancholy, the habits of a word-fancier, and became a man, and the representative voice of masses of men; the really important thing about Wordsworth was that he went below superficial differences and showed the eternal cosmopolitan in the provincial. But all that was too robust for us in those dying years of the nineteenth century.

As I look back on that time and the mental attitude of

## 4      Six Nineteenth-Century Fictionists

myself and my contemporaries, I am at a loss to explain why we seemed to think that because the century was dying it was necessary for us to die also. But there we sat in our languors and our mild despairs, reading the unhappy confessions of diarists, small novelists, and smaller poets. The poets and diarists wrote to tell us how miserable they were, and the novelists wrote to tell us how miserable all the rest of us were, and all agreed that the case was hopeless. Something in a minor chord and a dim light, something pensive, "hushed," and neutral-tinted,—that was what we wanted and that was what we got.

That was no time for the novels of Dickens,—Dickens, so unrefined and sensational, with his hilarious laughter and unrestrained tears, and his passion for making things happen in a novel. It was vulgar to care for Dickens in those days. Fortunately there were plenty of vulgar people who gloried in their vulgarity; fortunately there are always such in the world; it is they who save the world from dry-rot. But superior people, they who set the taste and wrote the reviews for the end-of-the-century, dismissed Dickens with one awful inclusive damnatory word,—a shuddering, withering, blasting word,—they called him "Mid-Victorian," and that ended it. The world had grown critical and psychological and pessimistic, and what could poor enthusiastic, optimistic Dickens do but slink away and hide his obstreperous head?

But about the beginning of the century the tide turned again. The century had hardly opened when books and magazine articles began to show that Dickens was again being read, not only by the dear and important mass of people who read books just to enjoy them, but also by that less important and less dear class who read books to write about them. By some mysterious law of human change, a fresh vigor came into American and British thought with the open-

ing of the new century, and it was inevitable that a fresh taste for the vigorous Dickens should follow.

Dickens was too splendidly alive to be permanently repressed. When that foregone generation, of which I was so completely a part that I feel at liberty to express my unfavorable opinion of it, neglected Dickens, it was no sign that Dickens was dead; it was only a sign that that generation was dying. Happily we revived before it was too late. And then there revived a relish for lively Dickens. Then it was that we saw that an author may be supremely important even though he does sometimes offend against the minute niceties of art, even though he sometimes outrages true moral perspectives, if only he is thoroughly alive, fascinatingly exuberant. Feeling a new zest for life, we once more got out the Dickens novels; still saw their faults,—faults so obvious that it would be child's play to indicate them,—but saw also and felt their power: a power to arouse laughter and great joy, tears and broad sympathies; a power to infect us with a new gratitude for life and the world. We found that we had latent and larger capacities than had been stirred by the languid ladies and gentlemen whose correct and feeble performances had left us mildly melancholy and sweetly discouraged.

The exuberant temperament of Dickens had naturally led him to an exaggerated literary method, an exaggeration which offends those who want restraint and poise in all things. It is rather a pity that people should limit their pleasures by arbitrary literary prescriptions and consequent dislike of those works which violate the qualities prescribed. It is unfortunate that one's admiration for the spontaneous simplicity of Wordsworth should lead him to a distaste for the spontaneous ornamentation of John Keats. "The world is so full of such a number of things" that it is a pity to select

## 6 Six Nineteenth-Century Fictionists

for enjoyment only a particular class of things and reject all earth's other bounty. The exaggerations of Dickens would never do for Miss Austen nor even for Thackeray, but they are a part of the bigness of Dickens, a part of his original and personal and vivid way of seeing and relishing this good, good world, as natural to him as the vivacious tones of his voice or the erect carriage of his head.

His humorous characters are exaggerated, caricatures, of course. In most of them Dickens took hints from nature, but being a colorist and no slavish copyist, he embellished and exaggerated nature with all his prodigal fancy and vocabulary. Mr. Micawber was more gloriously magniloquent and resilient, more comically depressed by small misfortunes and more sublimely optimistic under great misfortunes, than the elder Dickens or any actual prototype ever could have been. Never was there any real person so bland as Mr. Pickwick, so guileless and benignant, so perfect in the art of getting into scrapes. Nobody could have been quite so continuously jaunty as Dick Swiveller, or jolly as Mark Tapley. Never was there a woman quite so flighty as Mrs. Nickleby, or a man so explosive as Mr. Mantalini. Never was there anybody quite so grotesque and impersonal as Jack Bunsby, or quite so thick-headed and so lovable as Mr. Toots. And never from all of Nature's unlimited resources did she create so gorgeous an absurdity as Mrs. Gamp and her mythical friend Mrs. Harris.

Equally exaggerated are the hypocrites, and almost as funny. Happily, Nature never produced anything quite so slimy as Uriah Heep, so unctuous as Mr. Pecksniff, so oily as Chadband, who gave the impression, says Dickens, "of having a good deal of train-oil in his system." In the same manner are the villains. Nature does fairly well when she sets out to make a thoroughly bad man, but she scarcely

makes one as deliberately and calculatingly bad as Carker, as revoltingly bad as Quilp. The heroes and heroines are exaggerations of all the virtues; no examples are necessary.

Those personal descriptions of garb and gait and countenance by which he introduces so many of his characters are exaggerated; for instance, the metallic Miss Murdstone:

"She brought with her two uncompromising black boxes with her initials on the lids in hard brass nails. When she paid the coachman she took the money out of a hard steel purse, and she kept the purse in a very jail of a bag which hung from her arm by a heavy chain and shut up like a bite. I had never at that time seen such a metallic lady as Miss Murdstone."

Or the wooden Silas Wegg:

"Wegg was a knotty man and close-grained, with a face carved out of very hard material, with just as much play of expression as a watchman's rattle. When he laughed certain jerks occurred in him, and the rattle sprung. Sooth to say, he was so wooden a man that he seemed to have taken to his wooden leg naturally, and rather suggested to a fanciful observer that he might be expected—if his development received no untimely check—to be set up with a pair of wooden legs in about six months."

Or the thick and overlapping Mr. Boffin:

"He wore thick shoes and thick leather gaiters and thick gloves like a hedger's. Both as to his dress and himself, he was of an overlapping rhinoceros build, with folds in his cheeks, and his forehead, and his eyelids, and his lips, and his ears."

The word-play of Dickens is exaggerated: "Madame Mantalini wrung her hands for grief and rung the bell for her husband; which done, she fell into a chair and a fainting-fit simultaneously."

## 8 Six Nineteenth-Century Fictionists

His "strong scenes," to speak in theatrical language, are exaggerated, unrestrained in sentiment and expression, florid, running into rhythm like oratory. Yet who will say they are ineffective, those famous death scenes, the murder of Nancy, the execution of Sydney Carton, the death of little Nell, of little Jo, of little Paul Dombey? Perhaps we prefer the quieter way in which Colonel Newcome takes his departure. But may we not like both styles? Thackeray himself did, for he wrote the one and admired the other. When Thackeray read Paul Dombey's death he rushed into Mark Lemon's office, threw the book on the table, and exclaimed, "There 's no writing against this; one has n't an atom of chance. It is stupendous!" I think no one need be more fastidious than fastidious Mr. Thackeray.

Dickens was maintaining the traditions of his eighteenth-century masters who wrote novels before the world had grown critical. When Fielding made a good man he made him good, like Mr. Allworthy, and when he made a bad man he made him bad, like Blifil. It was the nineteenth century, with its twilight of faith, its scientific doubts, and its timidities, that had taken to shading vice and virtue until distinctions were all but lost. But Dickens kept the old vigor of the older time, when men were confident of themselves, knew what they meant and meant what they said, and drew their distinctions sharp and clear. His good people were absolutely good, like Tom Pinch and Ruth and Agnes and Lizzie Hexam. His villains were total villains, like Carker and Quilp. His hypocrites were complete hypocrites, like Pecksniff, Chadband, and Uriah Heep. His disagreeable people were entirely disagreeable, like Mrs. Wilfer. His rogues were unmitigated rogues, like Fagin and Bill Sikes. His grafters were outright grafters, like Bumble.

In respect of character drawing, Thackeray and George Eliot were more of their own nineteenth century, more given to complex shadings. Rawdon Crawley is a rake and a bounder and a good deal of a brute, but Rawdon Crawley is a man, and so he has our sympathy in the hour of his trial. My Lord Castlewood is a gambler, duelist, and libertine, but a wonderfully lovable fellow. Major Pendennis is a worldling and a snob, but it is quite impossible not to admire, even if secretly, the plucky old fellow, with his limited but strict ideas of duty. Captain Arthur Donnithorne betrays an innocent girl, but he is not a calculating villain like Carker, nor yet a melodramatic one, like Steerforth. Tito declines every responsibility, is false to every obligation, and meets deserved ruin, but leaves us mourning the overthrow of one so engaging as he had been. Then there is Lady Castlewood, so good and true a woman; but she is jealous and sometimes unjust, and three times sudden and violent in anger. Ethel Newcome is a fine loyal girl, what young men frequently call an "ideal girl," but she is sometimes arrogant and sometimes petulant. Even Colonel Newcome, the perfect chevalier of nineteenth-century British fiction, grows irritable as he grows old, grows suspicious as he grows poor, grows peevish as he grows ill. Dorothea Brooke is too noble to be tampered with by criticism, but she does suggest to the unregenerate that a little common sense would be an admirable thing to have on hand when one sets out on a "mission" in life. And though Adam Bede is a fine hero, he is sometimes a rather trying person, and sometimes a little heavy in his conversation. The people in the novels of Thackeray and George Eliot are never altogether good and seldom altogether bad. Some goodness qualifies the bad, some meanness discolors the good.

## 10      Six Nineteenth-Century Fictionists

Which is the more faithful to life, Dickens or Thackeray and George Eliot? Surely Thackeray and Eliot. Charity says it, and so does observation of our fellow-men:

“In men whom men condemn as ill  
I see so much of goodness still,  
In men whom men have called divine  
I see so much of sin and blot,  
I hesitate to draw the line  
Between the two, where God has not.”

Judging as we hope God judges, we trust there is none absolutely lost in evil:

“My own hope is, a sun will pierce  
The thickest cloud earth ever stretched:  
That after Last returns the First,  
Though a wide compass round be fetched;  
That what began best, can't end worst,  
Nor what God blessed once, prove accursed.”

But we are not gods but men, and we are fighting men. Every soldier who is also a philosopher—and there are many such—knows that there is honor, patriotism, truth, and loyalty on the other side. Do you suppose that the grave man in gray, he of the sad eyes bent on the wheat-fields and orchards that lay between his lines and the phalanxed blue on the rising ground of Gettysburg, thought that that marshaled enemy were all villains? You know very little of the character of General Lee if you so believe. But as a soldier it was his business to treat them as if they were villains, criminals, and wild beasts,—to kill them. A man cannot afford to philosophize very much when he is fighting. He must judge with absolute judgments. He must fight not in



the twilight of the doubt, but in the sharp distinctions of light and dark.

Dickens was a fighter. He believed that the world was good enough to fight for. He believed it was so good that it was worth a bold fight to make it better. So he must not muddy his judgments with partial verdicts; he must see good as good, and evil as evil in clear distinction, and without compromise. He must do everything in his power to change Britain because he believed Britain was worth changing. He had learned various lessons from the French Revolution, and with all his eager energy he undertook to apply them to his own country in his own day. It was the social rather than the political aspect of the convulsion which impressed him. He was less concerned with abstractions about "Liberty" than with applications of "Fraternity" and "Equality." But above all the other lessons that he got from the Revolution there was this, that misery is not "in the nature of things" and incurable, but contrary to the nature of things and hence curable. One kind of resignation has been defined as "a patient endurance of curable ills." Long before the eighteenth-century Revolution there had been upheavals for political and religious liberty, but moral and economic inequalities were tacitly accepted as conditions of existence on earth. The religious had hoped that these would be adjusted in heaven, but eighteenth-century revolutionists were impatient of that far-off consummation. They believed that society itself is largely responsible for earth's inequalities, and that what man has done man can undo. Hence France had flamed with hot resolution to suppress suppressible wrong and to realize realizable good. Nineteenth-century England was in peril of catching fire from the embers of the eighteenth-century French Revolution, a peril discerned by many, in-

## 12      Six Nineteenth-Century Fictionists

cluding Carlyle, and averted by the great Reform Movement of 1830 to 1850, bloodless reform instead of bloody revolution, a movement offering remedies which Carlyle perversely declined to accept while he fatuously harked back to medieval despotism as a cure-all.

What Carlyle scornfully rejected Dickens gladly accepted. He turned no backward pensive look on bygone times. He knew that human affairs, like the hands of the clock, move forward. And he wanted things to go forward even faster than they were moving in Great Britain. He wanted more reform, and more far-reaching reform, than England was getting, for he was not only a democrat and a progressive,—he was a radical of the radicals. If political and social institutions stood in the path of human betterment they must go. He had no reverence for British institutions either because they were institutions or because they were British. As reporter of debates in the House of Commons, he had taken written notes of the speeches and mental notes of the speakers, with the result that he had a very moderate opinion of the average "M. P.," and no opinion at all of parliamentary processes. He vigorously declined urgent calls to stand for Parliament because he had a contempt for Parliament and an emphatic determination not to be trussed up with its red tape and gagged with its "procedure." He judged that he could accomplish more as a free-lance agitator for reform in public speeches and in his novels.

Because things "had always been so" was, to his mind, a prime reason why they should not remain so. If Parliament had degenerated into a collection of "national dustmen," confusing people's vision instead of clarifying issues, then Parliament must be reformed,—and he said so in "Hard Times." If the Civil Service had become a "circumlocution office" so bound in red tape that it could do nothing, then the

Civil Service must be reformed,—and he said so in “Little Dorrit.” If the Court of Chancery served only to delay and thwart justice, then the Court of Chancery must be abolished,—and he said so in “Bleak House.” If the Poor Laws permitted fraud and graft and cruelty, then the Poor Laws must be amended,—and he said so in “Oliver Twist.” If the prisons of England were an outrage to humanity, then England’s prison system must be changed,—and he said so in “Little Dorrit” and “David Copperfield.” If there was in England a system of education which permitted cruelty to children, it must be wiped out,—and he said so in “Nicholas Nickleby.”

And he said all this none the less fiercely and effectively because he laughed hilariously while saying it. That is his almost unique distinction in reformatory literature, that he was in equal parts humanist and humorist. He incarnated the abuses of the English Poor Law system in Bumble, and Bumble would make a corpse laugh; of school cruelty in Squeers and Creakle; of the vicious public nursing system in Mrs. Gamp and Betsey Prig. England laughed herself weak over the pictures and then rose up and abolished the models. I am aware of no other reformer who got such apparently contrary results—wild laughter and a program fulfilled.

To my mind, the most interesting thing about the reform agitations of Dickens is that he got results, and the next most interesting thing is that he based his appeal on the very principles that are laid down by the scientific social workers of the twentieth century; namely, the interrelationships of society and the unnaturalness of social misery. These ideas permeate his works. The individual’s responsibility to society and society’s responsibility for the individual are, of course, the bed-rock of social endeavor. But twentieth-century scientific relief workers are equally insistent on the sec-

## 14      Six Nineteenth-Century Fictionists

ond idea—the abnormality of misery. Dr. Scott Nearing, in his book “Social Adjustment,” defines “adjustment” as “approximation to the normal,” and says:

“The methods of securing adjustment . . . differ in many ways, but upon one thing they are in accord,—they aim to remove maladjustment, to establish normal conditions of life and work, and thus to provide universal opportunity. Whatever else may be said of these methods, they unite in their ultimate end,—normality.” And Dr. Edward T. Devine, in his “Social Forces,” says:

“The principle that our goal is a *normal* community has greater significance than has yet been appreciated.”

It is interesting that the intuitions and sympathies of Dickens led him to conclusions identical with the principles that govern the modern scientific investigators: that society is a compact unit, that misery is abnormal and due to maladjustment, that therefore social ills are curable, that the children need first attention, that the battle can be won,—these are the concepts of twentieth-century science and of the Mid-Victorian novelist.

Fully to understand the significance of these things in the writings of Dickens, we must go back in imagination to the early years of Queen Victoria's reign. Notwithstanding all the reform afoot, other Englishmen of letters had not grasped these cardinal principles, simple as they now seem. Carlyle, student of history, sympathized with social misery, but advised a return to a foregone and abandoned paternalism, when all history taught the impossibility of turning back. But Dickens, who knew little history, knew better. Browning had a sentimental notion about the unity of society, but left it to the sentimental Dickens to show the practical bearings of the idea. Tennyson, the philosopher, felt the chill of the new science of evolution benumbing effort, but left it

to the unphilosophical Dickens to show that two can play at the game of environment; that if environment makes man, man can turn about and make environment. Scholar Thackeray pleaded for charitable judgment of mistaken men, but unlearned Dickens demanded charitable doing for suffering men. I really believe that Dickens read the signs of the times more truly than any of his contemporaries. He stands as the living tissue between the hot-headed dreamers who made the eighteenth-century French Revolution and the cool, practical workers of the twentieth century who are making the world more habitable. His intuitions taught him more practical lessons than Carlyle's libraries taught Carlyle.

And it was instinct married to experience which led his attention first of all to children. He had lived through the woes of a neglected and impoverished childhood, and in the happiest period of his maturity he could never think without a shudder of the days in the blacking warehouse and in the Marshalsea Prison, where his father was held for debt. But who knows what 's best for us? Unconsciously and in silence he was storing up impressions for the work that was to come,—not only to excite pity for unhappy children but a passion to make them happy. Possibly the way he kills off his youngsters is not the highest art, but the way he pleads for them to be kept alive is the highest humanity. Is it exaggeration to say that all this modern activity for child welfare is in an indirect way a monument to the man who roused vast pity for unfortunate children and stung the public into caring for them?

But with all his modernity, Dickens had but limited sympathy with that modern thing known as organization. Formal organization was new in his time, and there were enthusiasts who regarded organization as an end and object in itself. Not all of those enthusiasts are dead, either. Mrs.

## 16      Six Nineteenth-Century Fictionists

Jellyby, in "Bleak House," was Dickens's caricature of the woman who has gone organization-mad, her life a debauch of correspondence, committees, and appointments, with the only result a neglected and sullen family. Coketown in "Hard Times" is as organized as a department store, with societies for the promotion or prevention of all conceivable things, but the first promote only what should be prevented, and the second prevent only what should be promoted.

In these complex times organized charity is as necessary as charity, but Dickens did not understand this in all of its implications, for in some things he remained primitive. He understood the new idea of communal interests, but not its corollary, that communal interests sometimes require the suppression of charity. Therefore he was violent against England's revised Poor Laws, designed to check needless pauperism, but which seemed to him to check mercy. Modern sociology emphasizes the individual's obligations to society, but Dickens emphasized society's obligations to the individual; and when an organization intervened between the individual's need and society's mercy, Dickens grew violent.

He never fully understood how modern social conditions have complicated the problem of charity, but he did understand a pinched face, the index to a pinched stomach,—for he had felt that pinch himself. He could not see how a hungry stomach offered one problem in Jerusalem in the first century and another problem in London in the nineteenth century, or that a hungry stomach by itself is one problem, and a hungry stomach with a thousand others offers an entirely different kind of problem. Every stomach knoweth its own needs. Society may grow complex, but the stomach remains primitive. So if a hungry boy came into conflict with a system, Dickens was on the side of the boy; that was

Oliver Twist's case, and all the world knows where the sympathies of Dickens lay in that famous controversy. Law and the dietary said one thing, and Oliver's stomach said another thing, and Dickens believed that Oliver's stomach was more authoritative than the law.

I believe that Dr. Devine and Miss Jane Addams would agree that, though the Dickens sentiment unrestrained is dangerous to social welfare, it is still necessary as a corrective to science. In "Twenty Years at Hull House" Miss Addams writes something pertinent to this, something very notable from one of her practical experience:

"The one thing to be dreaded in the Settlement is that it lose its flexibility, its power of quick adaptation, its readiness to change its methods as its environment may demand. It must be open to conviction and must have a deep and abiding sense of tolerance. It should demand of its residents a scientific patience in the accumulation of facts, and the steady holding of their sympathies as one of the best instruments for that accumulation."

Miss Addams has here stated the social workers' problem, which should enlist all that one has of "fortitude and delicacy." It is the problem of acquiring science without relaxing sympathy. The virtues of modern charity are many, and some of them stern virtues, but it is still true that the greatest of these is—charity. Dickens had that to an excessive degree. If he were alive and could study the problem in the light of the discoveries made by hard-working, humane, scientific people, he would in all likelihood modify his views of organization and system. If he would not, he would be wrong. But if the organization ever finds itself hardening into routine, indifference, and stony heart, the leaders would do well to reread Dickens.

The laughter of Dickens was natural because he believed

## 18      Six Nineteenth-Century Fictionists

he was engaged in a winning fight. And as time goes on it proves to be a winning fight. One by one, the things against which he stormed and jeered have been abolished or improved: infamously mismanaged schools, worse workhouses, the grinding of children to powder in work they should not do, inhuman treatment of those merely suspected of wrongdoing, the barbarities of prisons, the delays of justice in courts of law, the indifference of capital to employees, the maddening slowness of governmental procedure. He had his part in bringing about improvement in these things; he stimulated the sentiment which led to the thought which resulted in action. And so he had the joy of the optimist who is occupied with something which he believes can be accomplished.

His was the optimism of a man who is concerned with evils that can be remedied, the optimism of one who sees man as a social animal, not as a spiritual entity. He was preoccupied with the things that Dr. Devine had in mind when he wrote his very suggestive book, "Misery and Its Causes." At the outset Dr. Devine states that social relief has to do with a special sort of misery, that which is "traceable to preventable disease and accident, to loss of employment and a low standard of living, to intemperance and vice and crime, to ignorance and inefficiency." These are social ills; it was with these that Dickens was primarily concerned, and he was happy because he believed there was a remedy if society could be sufficiently aroused to seek it. But Dr. Devine catalogues another class of ills with which his inquiry is not concerned, and which social endeavor does not undertake to correct: "remorse over some past misconduct, the total failure of some high ambition, disappointment in love, the loneliness which comes from the inability to make friends, the silent anguish of a parent's broken heart."



These are things that belong to the spirit, the things which Dickens handled less skilfully than social ills, the things which George Eliot handled best of all, though she too was interested in the problem of the poor. Dickens was best in exposing the evil which is social in its origin and therefore subject to alleviations by social change; George Eliot was best in that occult region where the human soul makes, un-makes, and remakes itself. Dickens is most effective when he is summoning society to help what society can reach; George Eliot is most impressive when she reveals what only the long arm of God can reach. Dickens is best as a social philosopher; George Eliot, as a moral philosopher.

Dickens was impatient of all evil, and aggressive to cure it. Because he was so, he rendered more service to the cause of actual reform than any other novelist of his time and nation. But because he was so, he unconsciously falsified some things—those things that belong to the depth and loneliness of the individual spirit, things beyond the influence of social effort and changed environment.

The optimism of Dickens comes from without, but the deepest and most far-reaching optimism comes from within. There is an inward power of recuperation which is indifferent to environment, superior to it. That was what George Eliot showed, what Dickens did not show. Samuel Butler, in "The Way of All Flesh," a book so good that it should have been better, says:

"All our lives long, every day and every hour, we are engaged in the process of accommodating our changed and unchanged selves to changed and unchanged surroundings; living, in fact, is nothing else than this process of accommodation."

This process of accommodation is just what we find in George Eliot's novels, and just what we miss in the novels

## 20      Six Nineteenth-Century Fictionists

of Dickens. Dora must die conveniently and give David Copperfield another chance for happiness—with his Agnes. But Romola does not remarry. She readapts herself to new conditions and finds inward peace.

When the devil has done his worst,—and his worst is pretty bad,—there is yet power of reaccommodation and recuperation for the brave heart and willing mind. In bereavement there is a law of compensation when the bereaved begins to think less of what he has lost and more of what he has had. It is by this process that Tennyson recovers himself in the "In Memoriam."

I walked with an old man whose wife was dying. Because I knew how he loved her I was astonished at his cheerfulness until he illuminated my understanding with one simple remark. He said, "I am losing her now, but I have had her for forty years, and that 's what counts." Then I suddenly understood the problem of life's mathematics whereby we make our possessions consist in what we wisely spend and not in what we save. To the dying woman the old man had given all, and in return had got what nothing could ever take away,—

"Not time that sayeth and gainsayeth,  
Nor wrath of gods nor wisdom of men,  
Nor all things earthly nor all divine,  
Nor joy nor sorrow nor life nor death."

He could face the future fearlessly because the past was safe. Suppose his was a special case, a rarer spirituality than usual,—and it was so,—still for others in time, if not in the first rending, readjustment comes where there is the willing mind. That is life, not changing the environment, but reaccommodating the spirit to the altered conditions.

It was splendid of Dickens to insist so boldly on that adjustment which is possible by altering social conditions, but it was his weakness to insist on applying the same principle in the region of the spirit, to assume that by rewarding all his good people and punishing all his bad people, by setting up all the good people in cozy worldly comfort at the end of the novel and banishing the bad people or putting them in jail, he had solved the problem of evil. The Dickens prescription is too simple: Are people unhappy in England? Then send them to Australia. Are people unhappily married? Then kill off their partners and remarry them to more congenial people. Make the good people happy and the bad people wretched at the end of the book, and there you are! Who calls this a complicated world? It is a very good world when an "optimistic" novelist is put in charge of it.

The valor and beauty of life sometimes consist in bearing bravely and cheerfully what can't be cured. The truest optimist is he who *wills* happiness, let the conditions be what they may. He is not necessarily an optimist who goes to a dinner and is happy because the meats agree with him. He is an optimist who is happy when the meats disagree with him. The seat of optimism is deeper than the digestive organs.

Just as stories, I am glad that his novels generally end happily,—the bad people punished and the good people rewarded. Personally I seem to have outgrown my taste for fictitious tragedy. I suppose that is a common experience,—as we grow older we become so horribly aware of life's sufficiency of actual tragedy. When I go to the theater now I want to see them all paired off before the curtain drops, and I don't want a messenger to come in and tell about it either. I want to see it with my own eyes. So in

## 22      Six Nineteenth-Century Fictionists

reading the novels of Dickens it is comfortable to know that everything is coming out right in the end: David and Oliver and Nicholas will be happy when we bid them good-by. But I know that this crashing full orchestral finale is not quite like life itself. The quieter, less completely satisfying endings of Thackeray and George Eliot are nearer the truth.

But this mistake that Dickens made was just a part of his bigness, and his faith that what right-thinking men would do right-willing men can do. His two leading traits of character were aggressiveness and impatience of delay; he wanted to do things, and he wanted to do them at once; and he wanted society to do things, and at once. He had impatient contempt for men who called that "fate" which is only inertia or insensibility to the sufferings of others. He knew that they who most frequently prate of "destiny" are those who are too feeble in will to make an effort, and those who profit from the suppression of others. He knew that much which society calls incurable is quite curable if society will bestir itself. He was generous and wanted everybody to have the remedy, and from society itself. So he stormed, derided, satirized, laughed, and fought; and so he got results where results were possible. In this world's economies some are always praying in the secret mountain-top and some are always fighting in the plain; Dickens was always with the fighters and at the front.

"Then said his Lordship, 'Well, God mend all!'—'Nay, by God, Donald, we must help him to mend it!' said the other."